

Intercultural Communication Competence in Customer Service

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<p>Abstract</p> <p>In today's highly mobile world, businesses must engage with multicultural customer bases, and this requires the development of intercultural cultural competence by staff to provide quality service and customer satisfaction for their customers. The objective of the study is to gain insight into the role culture plays in the ability of customer service representatives to provide quality services to their customers.</p> <p>An extensive literature review informed the foundation of the research, with an emphasis on intercultural communication competence. An exploratory research approach was implemented using mixed-method data collection. A survey combining both closed and open-ended questions was provided to young adults. The resulting data were coded and then analyzed.</p> <p>The analysis of the results divulged some of the challenges customers faced in service companies of multicultural communities which resulted from the cultural differences of customers and the customer care representatives. Further analysis provides insights into the role that good quality service and customer satisfaction play in a company. Culture's role in the process is clarified, and recommendations are suggested to improve the intercultural communication competence for service providing companies and their employees.</p>		
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1 Introduction

Globalization has made the world smaller than it looks, it transformed the world into a small village. Oxford dictionary defines globalization as the process by which businesses or other organizations develop international influences or start operating on an international scale. According to Kolb (2019), globalization is the word used to describe the growing interdependence of the world's economics, culture, and population, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flow of investment, people and information.

People move from one country to the other for the purpose of business, education, leisure, safety, and in search of a better life. They find themselves in new environments and communities with different cultures and languages from theirs. These movements transform monocultural communities into multicultural communities thereby creating the need to communicate, to understand, and be understood.

Communication, which is an active exchange of information goes beyond words, it includes facial expression, gesture, emotion, perception, signs, etc and these can be misunderstood due to cultural differences, hence the need for intercultural communication. Intercultural communication is the exchange of information (communication) that take place between people of different cultural background.

Customer service representatives of service providing companies in multicultural communities need good knowledge and practice intercultural communication to communicate and give their customers quality service, thereby creating a good customer base and profit for their company.

1.1 Research Objective

The objective of this research work is to determine the role culture plays in the quality of service provided by customer service representatives of service providing companies to customers.

1.2 Research Questions

To achieve the aim of this research work, the researcher created the following research questions:

1. How do young people see customer service in intercultural context today?
2. What challenges do these young people talk about in terms of their customer service experiences?
3. What can companies do to improve their cultural competence in their marketplace?

1.3 Structure of Research

This research work was carried out in accordance with the suggested thesis report instructions for the bachelor's thesis by JAMK. It comprises of 6 chapters which are structured for easy flow and comprehension.

Chapter one (1), provides the reader with the Introduction of the research, a short description of the topic, the background of the research, research questions, and the structure of the research. It explains the choice of the research topic acquainting the reader with the importance of getting customer service representatives of service providing companies/establishments skilled on intercultural communication competency. The Theoretical framework chapter (2) lays out the conceptual base of the research through the exploration of relevant secondary data. Chapter three (3), Methodology explains the research methods used in the research to provide answers to the research questions and how they were implemented. In the Results chapter (4) the researcher reports the results and discoveries of the research which explains

the role intercultural competence plays in the quality of service delivery to customers and it will be used in the conclusion.

Discussion chapter (5) centers on summarizing the outcome and findings of the research work, provides answers to the research questions and focusing on the specific outcomes that relate to the research. The final chapter (6) which is the Conclusion, summarizes the research work, proves its reliability, and provides suggested recommendations for service providing companies on how the quality of service delivery can be improved which in turn will provide customer satisfaction.

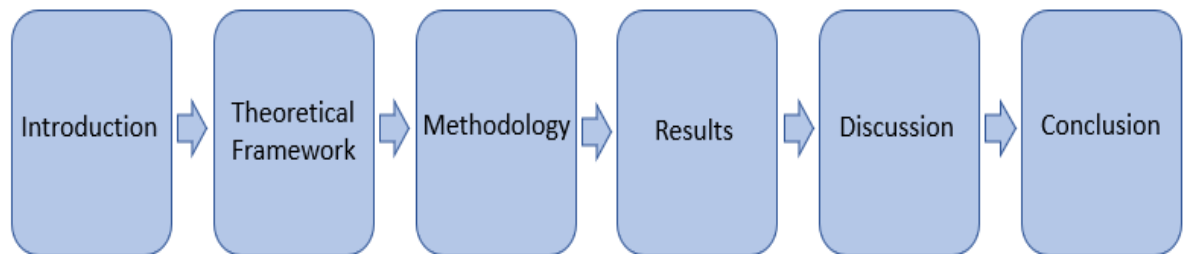


Figure 1. Structure of the research

2 Theoretical framework

Worldwide travel in the past few decades has experienced a time of geometric increase. International tourist arrivals worldwide are expected to increase by 3.3% per year from 2010 to 2030 and reach 1.8 billion by 2030, according to the World Tourism Organization (2011)'s long term forecast. Many hospitality organizations find it demanding to cater to global travelers with various cultural backgrounds. Particularly, the cultural nuances in language, customs, and norms imply different rules and expectations related to customer-provider interactions. Such differences frequently result in discomfort felt by both parties in the binary interaction. To better meet the demands of their intercontinental customers, some hospitality establishments make their service offerings and communication approaches based on the customer's cultural background (Wang, Miao & Mattila 2015).

Increasing the recognition of the significance of services, there is a growing awareness that the competitive strategies in retailing may integrate a framework of intercultural service quality assessment and enhancement. This has given rise to the notion of measuring the service quality (SQ) with cultural aspects in retailing, which has become a crucial element in the retailer business. Integration in emerging economies, globalization, elimination of trade barriers, and innovations in technology have facilitated and compelled the retailers to internationalize many value chain activities. Nevertheless, despite suggestions of enlarged cultural homogeneousness, the retailers continue to struggle in overseas markets due to their inability to understand and overcome cultural differences (Ihtiyar & Ahmad 2015b, 146.)

Ihtiyar and Ahmad emphasize the need for quality service because people may find themselves in countries and communities different from their original countries for any reasons. These reasons may be business-related – globalization, integration in emerging economies, removal of trade barriers, etc, or individual – in search of a better life, education, wars, etc. Whatever the reason may be, people tend to move to different countries and need to communicate with people in their new environment or communities to get along with their daily or business activities. And this also affects the level of customer satisfaction received from service providing companies.

The intercontinental diaspora of well qualified educated people and the universal competition for very skilled people are widespread trends in the modern world. A growing number in countries are enlisting internationally, and a larger number of skilled people are being drawn into the intercontinental labor force in which international enlisting is an important component of human resource planning (Keisala, Kovalainen, Majakulma & Pitkänen 2018, 60).

Communication becomes a challenge for people who find themselves in communities or countries where a different language from theirs is spoken or a multicultural community and they need to either carry out transactions or receive services. Companies and service providers in such communities or countries need to have

customer service representatives with good intercultural communication skills to give the best service to their customers.

Customer service is the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high-quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met. Customer service is meeting the needs and desires of any customer. Some characteristics of good customer service include promptness, politeness, professionalism, and personalization (what is customer service 2016).

According to Pesonen et al. (2002, 44), Tarkkonen (2014), service is defined as a non-physical experience that is controlled by emotions. Service can not be touched but can be experienced and it shows its results through emotions and feelings. Customer satisfaction is affected by the quality of service offered to the customers through the interaction of both the customer and the service provider. Satisfying experiences are cherished by the customer, creating a good and unforgettable memory. The customer is the judge of the quality of service delivered because he/she is at the receiving end of the transaction.

As the customers' first point of contact, the customer service representative is often referred to as the 'face' of the establishment. The details of their role are usually embodied within a 'script', that specifies the how, when, what and where of emotional displays and exists at the societal, occupational, and organizational levels. While these scripts vary across establishments, a usual direction fundamental to all is the need to meet and or exceed customer expectations. In other words, given the emotional nature of service encounters, the goal of the customer service representative is to ensure that customers leave with the positive emotion of satisfaction. However, several factors that may hinder this positive result includes the attitude and behavior of the customer service representatives towards the cultural difference of customers. (Barker & Härtel 2004.)

The customer service representative plays several important relational roles for the customer. Customer service representatives help customers with complaints and questions, give customers information about products and services, take orders, and process returns, and ensures quality service is provided. The customer service representatives also create and maintains customer relations and provide additional services where needed (Tarkkonen 2014).

It has become more important to understand the ways of intercultural communication during the years. Intercultural communication means communication between representatives from different national or ethical cultures. It requires that workers in the hospitality field are multilingual and able to understand cultural differences in communication, too. Besides the language and verbal communication, it is important to know at least the basics about differences in non-verbal communication of cultures around the world (Portaankorva 2017).

For the above to be effective, the customer care service personnel need to be well equipped both for the company providing the service and the customers receiving the service. If poor service is provided due to the communication gap, the company's major aim which is to provide service, products and make a profit from it will not be achieved. And the customer these services are provided for will not receive good service.

The world has developed and has become more multicultural. The multiculturalism of the clientele of service providing companies is increased thereby increasing the level of the intercultural competence demand on customer service representatives because they interact with and provide service for customers from different cultural backgrounds daily. Today, customer service is important for every company and thus, it is recommended to invest in improving it (Tarkkonen 2014).

The need for good intercultural communication skills by the customer service representative cannot be overemphasized. As mentioned earlier, the customer care is the face of the company or establishment and the customer care needs to create and give its customers good and satisfactory service. Which in turn gives the

company or establishment good name, repeat visits, or business (as the case may be) and generate more revenue and profits for the service providing company.

2.1 Intercultural Communication Competence

According to Friedman & Antal (2005), Ihtiyar & Ahmad (2015a, 137) defines intercultural communication competence (ICC) as the ability to think, differentiate, internalize various cultural settings, manage experiences correctly, and create effective communication most applicable to people with different cultural backgrounds in a multi-cultural environment. Intercultural communication competence is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with individuals who speak different languages and are from different cultural backgrounds. Empathy, respect, tolerance, sensitivity, and flexibility are essential in effective intercultural communication (Sun 2014.)

Similarly, intercultural communication competence is the ability to relate effectively and appropriately with people in various cultural contexts. Motivation, knowledge of one's self and knowledge of others, and tolerance for uncertainty are some key components of intercultural communication competence. Motivation refers to the root of an individual's desire to encourage intercultural relationships and can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Mindfulness is a state of keeping track of oneself and others that informs later reflection on communication interactions. Tolerance for uncertainty refers to a person's attitude about and level of comfort in unknown conditions (Communication in the Real World. 2013, chapter 8.4).

According to Sharma, Tam, & Kim (2009); Bennett,(2007) and Ihtiyar & Ahmad (2015a), intercultural communication competence (ICC), deals with having the right mindset, skill, and sensitivity when managing in cross-cultural situations, has become a new area of focus amongst marketers in ensuring customer satisfaction (CS). CS, on the other hand, is significant to enduring business success and is one of the most frequently examined notions in the context of marketing. CS with highly satisfied service quality (SQ) has been recognized as an important factor for the

characteristics of long-term business success, improved customer retention, positive word-of-mouth, increased profitability, and sustainable competitiveness. (136.)

2.2 Cultivating Intercultural Communication Competence

Intercultural competence is the main resource for successful and effective communication and exchange (Krajewski 2011, 138). Intercultural Communication Competence is not an ability or skill that one is born with, it needs to be consciously developed or cultivated. No matter how well cultured and nurtured an individual is raised, cultural background, beliefs and thought process of people differs.

There is no explicit definition of the type of knowledge and skills that a customer representative needs to develop to be interculturally competent, and how this can be achieved. Developing intercultural competence is not a straightforward and orderly process but one that is controlled by various personal and circumstantial factors. To attain the most positive result of internationalization efforts, there is a need for more and extensive awareness of cultural diversity and the circumstances that shape this diversity. (Krajewski 2011, 138.)

Different opinions are shared by writers on ways intercultural communication competence can be developed from different perspectives. Krajewski (2011), highlights the fact that no one writer has the correct method, design, or model to cultivate this skill. According to him, there cannot be a 'one size fits all model', but most designs include similar measurements and vary in prominence and detail of these components. All these include awareness (of the self, of the other), an open-minded attitude, intercultural knowledge and skills that lead to effective communication and behavior as the end product. (138).

The article (Communication in the Real World. 2013), states that the three ways to cultivate ICC are to foster attitudes that motivate, discover knowledge that informs, and develop skills that enable. To encourage attitudes that motivate, one must accept and appreciate the wonder of cultural diversities. This sense of wonder can be

the cause of feeling overwhelmed, humbled, or awed. This sense of wonder may also correspond to a high tolerance for uncertainty, which can help turn potentially discouraging experiences into a knowledge giving one (chapter 8.4).

To achieve this, observation should be made without evaluation and judgment. According to Rosenberg, (The basics of Non-Violent Communication. 2013), see the behavior separate from the judgment. According to Hofstede & Hofstede & Pedersen (2002, 17), Känninen (2014), mentioned that the key elements for gaining awareness are separating observation and interpretation. Meaning when people with different cultural background interact for the first time, it is important not to judge a person's actions based on what you know or what you have heard from other people. It is important to learn, understand, and correctly elucidate behaviors and gestures of people from other cultures not minding or taking note of what has happened before.

Locating knowledge that informs is another step that can build on one's ICC competence. Educating oneself more about our cognitive style, or how we learn is an important tool. Our cognitive styles are made of our preferred patterns for gathering information, fabricating meaning, arranging, and applying the knowledge acquired. As we explore cognitive styles, we notice that people attend to and perceive the world, explain events, organize the world, and use rules of logic differently (Communication in the Real World. 2013, chapter 8.4). Cultures have different cognitive styles and people raised from these cultures will practice their respective cognitive styles. Some culture's cognitive maybe people/relationship-oriented while others may be task-oriented. When a customer service representative or service provider understands this, it will help boost the quality of service rendered to the customer.

According to Bennett (2009), (Communication in the Real World. 2013), developing skills that enable is another way to cultivate ICC competence. Some of the skills important to ICC are the ability to empathize, accumulate cultural information, listen, resolve conflict, and manage anxiety. (chapter 8.4.) Motivation and knowledge can help boost these skills in intercultural establishment or environment.

Contact alone does not increase intercultural skills; there must be more deliberate measures taken to fully capitalize on those encounters. While the research now shows that intercultural contact does decrease prejudices, this is not enough to become interculturally competent. The ability to empathize and manage anxiety enhances prejudice reduction, and these two skills have been shown to enhance the overall impact of intercultural contact even more than acquiring cultural knowledge (Communication in the Real World. 2013, chapter 8.4).

Deardorff (2006), in her pyramid design explained how intercultural competence can be developed. This design or model of intercultural competence provides levels of competence which means that the more the skills gained and cultivated, the higher the level of intercultural competence displayed. Though the acquired skills explain the definition, it is not restricted to the items incorporated in the provided model. The model provides progression and improvement for some measuring tools in some conditions alongside creating foundational blocks for all-round measurement of the skill, thereby bringing together various definitions of intercultural competence provided by different scholars. The model shows that the development of intercultural competence skill begins from within a person and this has to do with the person's attitudes, personal qualities, and behavior which then leads to the interactive results. This means that people demonstrate what is embedded in them. The skills described in the model by Deardorff are skills that can help customer service representatives acquire the ability to develop, process, and understand culture. (225)

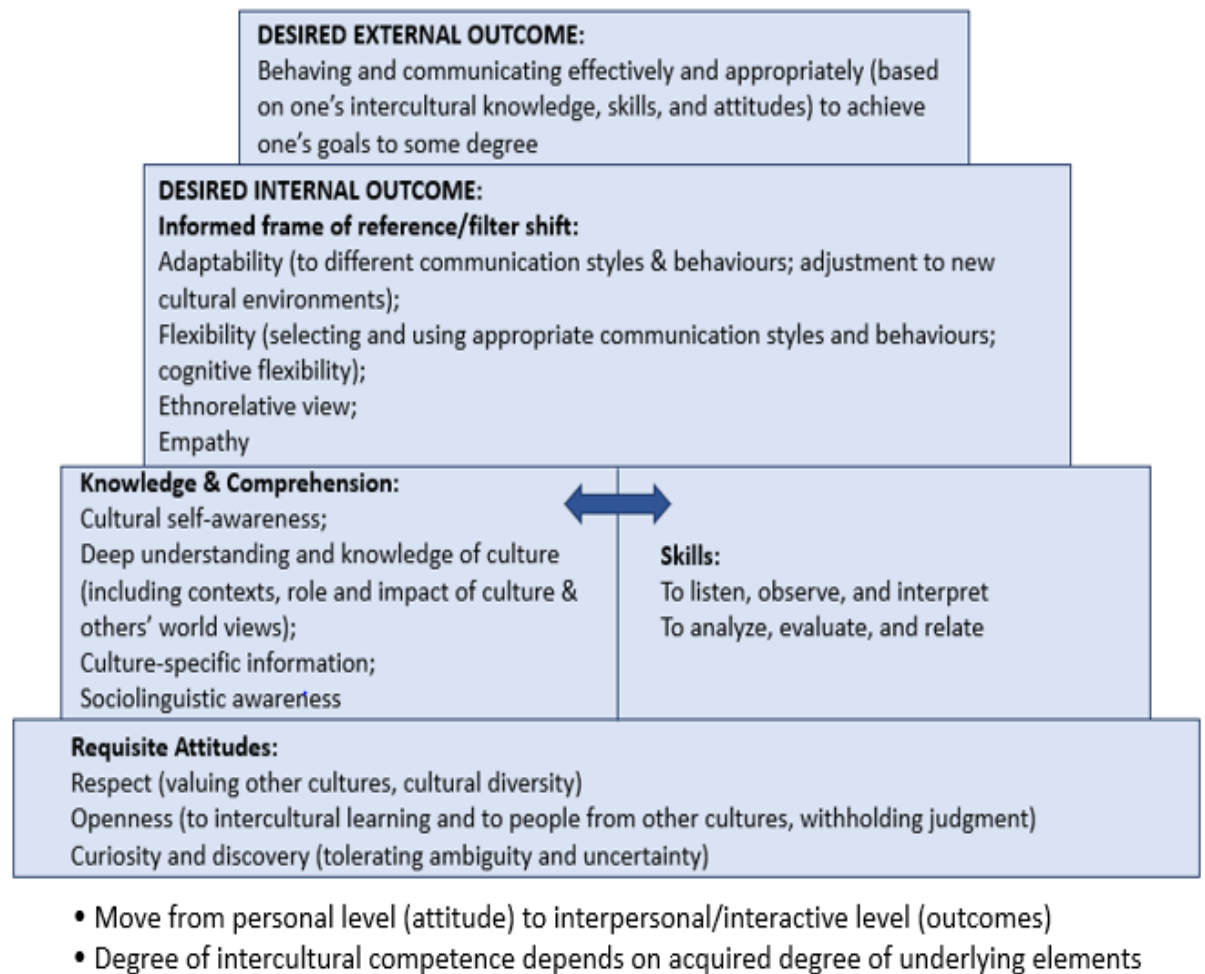


Figure 2. Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence

Source: Deardorff (2006).

Another intercultural competence development method is the four developmental stages developed by the American Council on International Intercultural Education (1996) cited by Deardorff (2006).

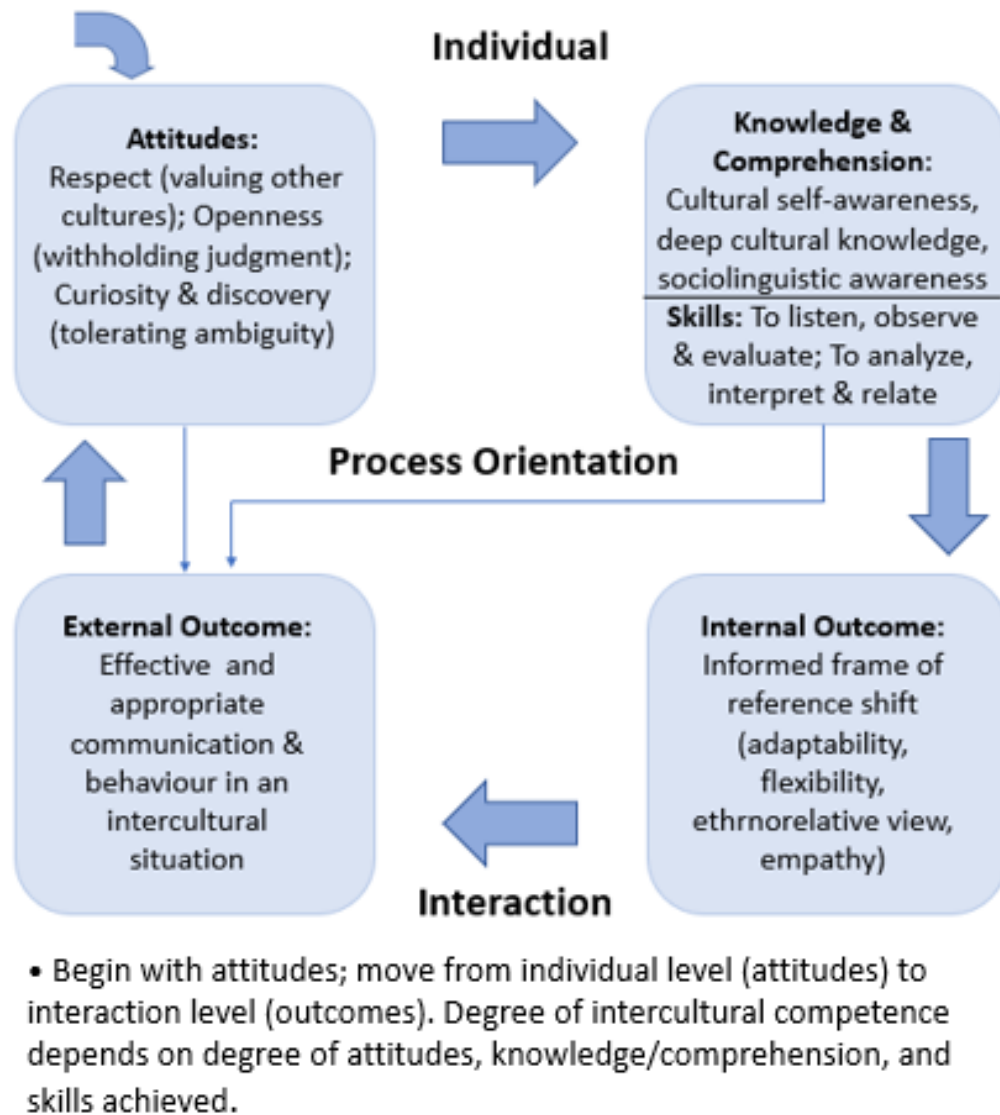


Figure 3. Process Model of Intercultural Competence

Source: Deardorff (2006).

Comparing the 2 models shown in Figures 2 and 3, it can be said that both authors had the same idea in mind. They may have created different models or designs but both models describe the same process. There are some key points worth noting in these models that can help customer service representatives cultivate intercultural communication competence.

- a) Understanding that the world has become a global village bringing people closer than before. Countries have changed from being a mono-cultural

community to multicultural communities. No matter how far or small a country is, the residents in that country are not locals.

- b) Change comes with differences in cultural practices, hence the need for the development of intercultural competence skills so as to be able to communicate, to understand and be understood
- c) Knowing and understanding that history and circumstance plays a great role in this development of these skills
- d) The foundation of this development comes from within an individual and it requires specific work

The authors of this model recognized that the first level is of paramount importance for all who need the development which is the same as the Deardorff's pyramid model. (256-257.)

Once the demand for intercultural competences is accepted and felt as urgency, it becomes necessary to develop a wide range of theoretical concepts and definitions acknowledging different understandings, taking into consideration the existing diversity of languages, religions, histories, and identities (Intercultural Competences: conceptual and operational framework 2013, 9.)

According to Krajewski (2011), intercultural competence focuses on effective communication. Sociolinguistic awareness and successful verbal and non-verbal methods communication are very important in intercultural competence. Good communicative skill is the heart of existing models of quality intercultural communicative competence. (140.)

Intercultural communicative competence is a developmental process that matures over an extended period. Both employees and employers of organizations are at various levels of awareness, knowledge, and skills along with the cultural competence furtherance (Cross et al., 1989). To develop and strengthen the roots of intercultural communication competence in customer service representatives is a

positive step towards increasing the effectiveness of any intercultural experience of the customer (ibid.,140).

Intercultural competences also must be actively taught, promoted, enacted, in order to play a role in a wide range of contexts: informal as well as non-formal education, and in social institutions of all sorts – political, cultural, or economic (Intercultural Competences: conceptual and operational framework 2013,

3 Methodology

This chapter recounts the research methods used which also includes the basis of the collection of data.

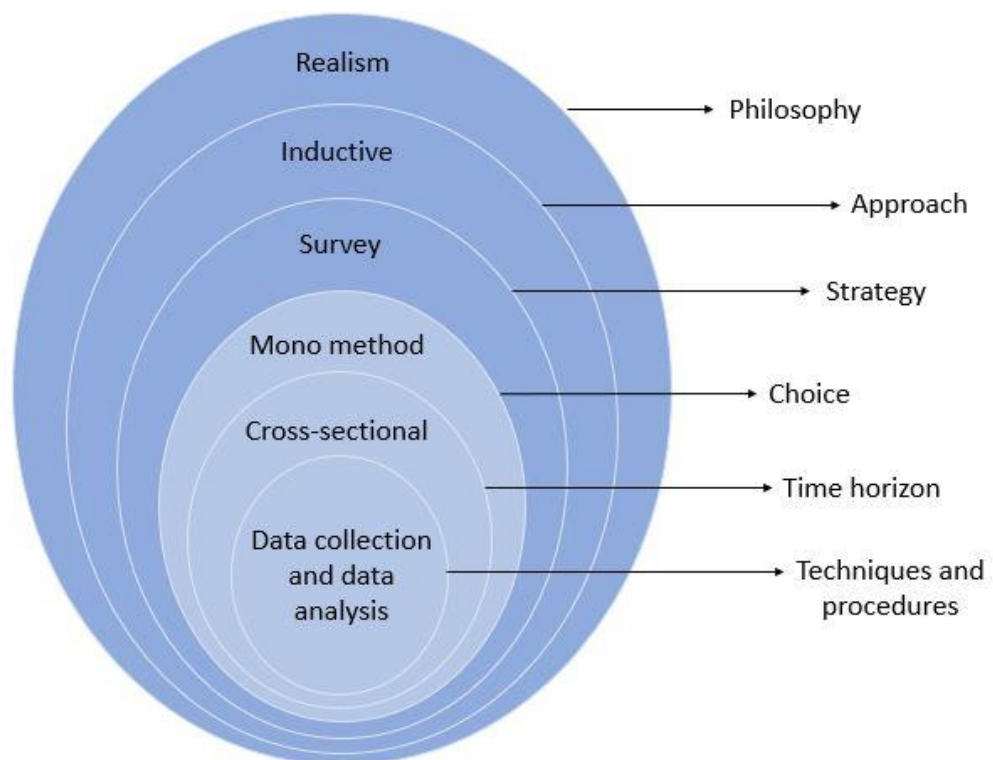


Figure 4. Research "Onion"

Source: Mark Saunders; Philip Lewis; & Adrian Thornhill (2009)

The above diagram as described by Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, illustrates the step by step process of the research method and this was applied in this research work to provide answers to the research questions below.

1. How do young people see customer service in intercultural context today?
2. What challenges do these young people talk about in terms of their customer service experiences?
3. What can companies do to improve their cultural competence in their marketplace?

The whole process begins from the outer layer of the "onion" which is the philosophy layer down to the inner layer which is the data collection and analysis layer. These layers are discussed in this chapter.

3.1 Philosophical Stance

The research philosophy used in this thesis by the researcher is realism. "Realism is the view that entities of a certain type have an objective reality, a reality that is completely ontologically independent of our conceptual schemes, linguistic practices, beliefs, etc." (The basics of philosophy). According to Julnes, (2015) realism, as a philosophical approach with relevance for the social sciences, is a continually developing set of philosophical positions intended to justify taking seriously our commonsense experience of our world. The reason for this choice is because the research work is based on people and the way they relate with each other. The way they are been treated, what they see, and what they get. How culture affects the type of service delivered to a customer by a customer service personnel of a service providing company. The elements of the philosophy used in this research work are; ontology, epistemology, and axiology. **Ontology** is concerned with the nature of reality(Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, 110). The researcher's view was objective. Recording/ taking note of the relationship between customer service representatives and the customers, how the relationship/ interaction ended, and how the interaction

was interpreted through culture. **Epistemology** concerns what constitutes acceptable knowledge in a field of study. (Saunders et al. 2009, 112.) The researcher's view concerning what accounts for acceptable knowledge. Observable topics provide credible data and facts. Sparse data means imprecision in sensations. On the other hand, topics create sensations that are prone to misjudgment. Pivots on explaining within circumstance or circumstances. **Axiology** is a branch of philosophy that studies judgments about value. (Saunders et al. 2009, 116.) The thesis researcher's view of the part of values in research. The research is value loaded, the researcher is biased by world view, cultural experiences, upbringing, and background as this plays part in influencing the research.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is an exploratory study. The research used to investigate a problem that is not clearly defined. It is conducted to have a better understanding of the existing problem, but will not provide conclusive results (Bhat 2020a). The researcher takes a look at the role culture plays in the quality of service delivered to customers by customer service representatives of service providing companies such as departmental stores, hospitality industries, electronics stores, grocery stores, etc

3.2 Approach

3.2.1 Inductive Approach

The researcher used the inductive approach in this research to get the feel of what was going on between customers and customer care representatives of service providing companies with regards to culture, to properly understand how culture affects the quality of service customers receive. According to Gabriel 2013, the inductive approach aim is usually focused on exploring new events or looking at previously researched happenings from a different perspective.

3.3 Research Strategy/ Method

3.3.1 Survey

This research work was carried out using a survey that was answered anonymously. Surveys have a variety of purposes and can be carried out in different ways depending on the methodology chosen and the objectives to be achieved (Bhat 2020b). Also according to Wolf (2016), surveys are an excellent way to collect a large amount of information from a given population. The 8-question survey with questions on culture and quality of service received from customer service representatives of service providing companies such as departmental stores, hospitality industries, electronic stores, grocery stores, etc, was administered to young adults. Participants were asked if they felt their culture, the culture of the customer care representative or both influenced the quality of service they received either negatively or positively and were encouraged to share their experience of service received.

The mixed-method was used in the research because the survey had both close-ended and open-ended questions to source its data. The term “mixed methods” refers to an emergent methodology of research that proceed the structured integration, or “mixing,” of quantitative and qualitative data within a single investigation or sustained program of inquiry. The fundamental premise of this methodology is that such integration allows a more complete and synergistic utilization of data than do separate quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis (Wisdom & Creswell 2013.) Mixed methods research is a process of research in which researchers integrate quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to best understand a research purpose. The way this process unfolds in a given study is shaped by mixed methods research content considerations and researchers’ personal, interpersonal, and social contexts (Clark & Ivankova 2017.)

Quantitative data includes close-ended information such as that found to measure attitudes (e.g., rating scales), behaviors (e.g., observation checklists), and

performance instruments. While qualitative data consists of open-ended information that the researcher usually gathers through interviews, focus groups, and observations. The analysis of the qualitative data (words, text, or behaviors) typically follows the path of collecting it into categories of information and presenting the diversity of ideas gathered during data collection (Mixed Research Method 2016). Qualitative Research is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations, and quantitative research is used to quantify the problem by way of generating numerical data or data that can be transformed into usable statistics. (Defranzo 2011).

3.4 Research Method Choice

3.4.1 Mono method

The researcher used a single data collection method and corresponding analysis procedure. The research method used in data collection for this research was the survey. The respondents completed an online survey over the internet through a link sent on different social media platforms. In online surveys, the margin of error is reduced, as the respondents register their answers by easy selection buttons (Bhat 2020b).

3.5 Research Time horizon

Cross-sectional

This was a cross-sectional research. The data for this research was collected at a set time because it is an academic research work with time constraints. And it is a research that seeks to describe or explain the role culture plays in the quality of service delivery given to customers by the customer care representatives of service providing companies. Cross-sectional studies are naturally clear and allow the examination of a large number of variables (Thelle & Laake 2015).

3.6 Data Collection and data analysis

This research work had its data collected from primary and secondary data sources. Secondary data is public information that has been collected by others. It is typically free or cheap to get and can act as a strong understructure for any research work — in as much as you know where to find it and how to judge its worth and relevance (Wolf 2016). Similarly according to Foley (2018), secondary data analysis involves a researcher using the information that someone else has gathered for his or her purposes. Researchers leverage secondary data analysis in an attempt to answer a new research question or to examine a different perspective of the original question of a preceding study. Secondary data include raw data and published summaries of other writers (Saunders et al. 2009, 256.) The secondary data used in this research were collected from books, journals, and online articles.

The primary data used in this research was collected through a survey created by the researcher. Primary data is the original data that researchers collect for the research purpose (Foley 2018). Primary data, new information collected specifically for your purposes, directly from people in the know. Methods of primary data collection vary based upon the goals of the research, as well as the type and depth of information being sought (Wolf 2016). As mentioned earlier, the 8 questioned survey was administered to some International business students at Jamk and some young adults. The aim was for them to share the experiences they had with customer care representatives of service providing companies. And to know the role culture plays in the quality of service delivery. The survey was filled anonymously. The survey had some closed-ended and some opened ended questions which gave the participants room to share their experiences.

The survey used for this research work had 8 questions. The branching method was used in the survey after the 5th question which led to either the 6th question or the 8th depending on the respondent's answer to the 5th question. Branching is a questionnaire design technique used in survey research that utilizes skip patterns to ensure that respondents are asked only those questions that apply to them. This

technique allows the questionnaire to be tailored to each respondent so that respondents with different characteristics, experiences, knowledge, and opinions are routed to applicable questions. (Lavrakas 2008, 69.)

Questions 1-3 were demographic, questions 4 & 5 were close-ended questions and the last 3 questions were open-ended questions where the respondents were asked to share the experiences and outcomes they had with customer care representatives either positive or negative. The last question was for advice to customer service representatives of service providing companies.

3.7 Timeline of the research

The timeline or schedule of the research implementation which delineates the main phases, procedures and participants involved in each phase of the research work process is shown in the table below. The table shows the important events and procedures that took place from the beginning of the research work to the end of it.

Table 1. Research Implementation Timeline

Time Period	Research Implementation Matter	People Involved
September 2019	Thesis Topic Formation	Piotr Krawczyk
October 2019	Thesis Proposal Draft 1	Piotr Krawczyk
November 2019	Thesis Proposal Draft 2	Piotr Krawczyk
December 2019	Final Thesis Proposal	Steven Crawford (Thesis Supervisor)
February 2020	Research Plan	Steven Crawford
March 2020	Change of research plan Beginning of literature review writing	Steven Crawford
April 2020	Finished literature review Research Methodology Data Collection	Steven Crawford, Survey Respondents
May 2020	Data Analysis Development of discussion, conclusion and abstract Thesis Submission	Steven Crawford Thesis Committee

4 Results

4.1 Summarized Demographics

Demographic information provides data regarding research participants and is necessary for the determination of whether the individuals in a particular study are a representative sample of the target population for generalization purposes.

Examples of demographic characteristics include age, race, gender, ethnicity,

religion, income, education, homeownership, sexual orientation, marital status, family size, health and disability status, and psychiatric diagnosis. (Salkind 2010.)

Table 2. Summarized demographics

Distribution Factor	Number of Participants	Total % (N=62)
Gender		
Male Respondents	33	53.23%
Female Respondents	29	46.77%
Age		
18 – 20 years	5	8.06%
21 – 24 years	22	35.48%
25 – 30 years	16	25.81%
Above 30 years	19	30.65%

The table above delineates the summarized characteristics of the study sample. The table shows the 2 demographic characteristics used in the research, the gender and age of the respondents. The total number of the respondents was 62, 33 of which were male and 29 female. The research was targeted at young adults.

The 3rd demographic characteristics used in the survey of this research was nationality. The 62 respondents had 30 Finns, 8 Nigerians, 4 Russians, 2 Chinese, 2 Afghanistan's and remaining nationalities Ivorian, Kenya, Ghanaian, South Korea, Tanzanian, Ethiopian, Zimbabwean, Congo, British, Lithuanian, Icelandic, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, India, Spanish, and American had 1 respondent each. The summary of the nationalities is shown in the pie chart below.

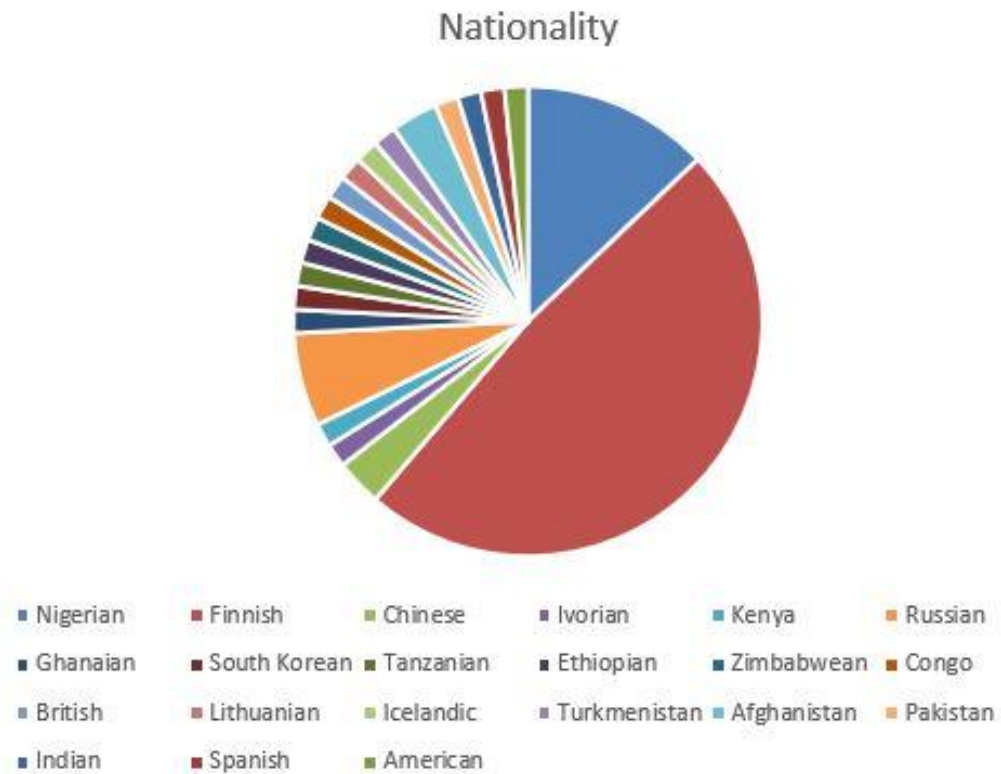


Figure 5. Nationality of respondents

As mentioned earlier, the mixed method was used in the survey because the survey had both open-ended and close-ended questions.

4.2 Quantitative Data Answers

The survey had 2 questions with quantitative data answers. According to Thompson (2017), quantitative research is a strategy that involves the collection of numerical data, a deductive view of the relationship between theory and research, a preference for a natural science approach (and for positivism in particular), and an objectivist conception of social reality. These questions were close-ended questions with either yes or no answers.

The respondents were asked if they believed national culture may affect the quality of customer service provided by service providers? And out of the 62 responses

received, 55 respondents which were about 88.7% answered Yes. And the remaining 7 respondents which was 11.3% answered No.

The next question the respondents were asked was: Can you recall a time when you felt that your own culture or the customer service representative's national culture, or both, influenced the quality of service you received? (The experience can be negative or positive.) To this, 36 respondents which were 58.1% answered Yes while the remaining 26 respondents which were 41.9% answered No.

4.3 Qualitative Data Answers

Qualitative research is expressed in words. It is used to understand concepts, thoughts, or experiences. This type of research enables you to gather in-depth insights on topics that are not well understood. (Streefkerk 2020.) This section has 3 open-ended questions in which the respondents shared their experiences, the outcome of their experiences and advice to customer service representatives of service providing companies.

These open-ended questions generated different answers because the respondents had different experiences and opinions. The researcher used codes and word clouds to simplify these answers. "A word cloud is a group, or cluster, of words reproduced in different sizes. The bigger and bolder the word emerges, the more often it's mentioned within a given text and the more salient it is". (Word clouds & the value of simple visualizations 2014.)

The branching method as earlier mentioned was used after the 5th question. The respondents whose answers to the previous question (question 5) was Yes, proceeded to the next question (question 6). And those whose answers were No moved to question 8.

Respondents who believed national culture may affect the quality of customer service provided by service providers (question 4) and recalled times when they felt that their own culture or the customer service representative's national culture, or

both, influenced the quality of service they received negatively or positively (question 5), were asked to briefly share the experiences they had. Their answers were collected, grouped by codes developed by the researcher, and simplified for this report by using the word cloud. The created codes used were key words generated from the answers given by the respondents, answers that had the same meaning even though were said differently were grouped in the same code.

The most mentioned experience was a positive experience, closely followed by respondents who mentioned the language barrier affected their experience, some of the respondents had negative experiences and 1 respondent had no experience. Other experience codes are shown in the word cloud below.



Figure 6. Word cloud visual summary for answers to question 6

The respondents were asked in the next question to describe what the outcome of the service they received was if the service was resolved to their satisfaction or they faced new issues (question 7). A large number of them mentioned they had their issues resolved, some mentioned they were disappointed, some mentioned giving negative feedback, some mentioned helped themselves look for and get what they wanted (self-service), some mentioned they will never go back to the same place

again and 2 mentioned none – meaning that they had no experience. Others are shown in the word cloud below.



Figure 7. Word cloud visual summary of answers to question 7

All 62 respondents answered the 8th question which was the last question. They were asked to advise service providers who work in a multicultural environment. The most mentioned advice was cultural competence, open-mindedness, equality, multicultural, understanding, patience, respect, and empathy. The least mentioned advice was proactive, polite, eye-contact, approachable, friendly, and welcoming. They are really small in the word cloud summary which may be difficult to see. The summary of their answers is shown below.



Figure 8. Word cloud visual summary of answers to question 8

5 Discussion

The researcher located useful and relevant sources for the literature review that served as the base for the following research questions:

1. How do young people see customer service in intercultural context today?
2. What challenges do these young people talk about in terms of their customer service experiences?
3. What can companies do to improve their cultural competence in their marketplace?

The research work investigated the experiences young adults from different nationalities had with customer service representatives of service providing companies such as groceries stores, departmental stores, hospitality industries, etc. 62 young adults, 33 male, and 29 female, from 18 years and above with 43 of them been between 18 – 30 years and 19 been above 30 years and from across 22 countries comprised the diversified sample of this research. They answered an 8 question survey which had demographic, open-ended, and closed-ended questions aimed to explore the role intercultural communication competence plays in the quality of services given to customers.

This called attention to the fact that intercultural communication competence is an important ingredient in good service and customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction indicates the fulfillment that customers derive from doing business with a firm or company. In other words, it's how happy the customers are with their transaction and overall experience with the company (What is customer satisfaction? 2020.) This can also affect the service providing the company's profits and reputations because it will either lead to service increase through return visits and goodwill or loss of customers and bad feedbacks which spreads very fast like wildfire. Customers derive satisfaction from a product or a service based on whether their need is met effortlessly, in a convenient way that makes them loyal to the firm. Hence, customer satisfaction is an important step to gain customer loyalty (What is customer satisfaction? 2020.)

The survey, after the demographic questions, started with a closed-ended question asking the respondents: Do you believe national culture may affect the quality of customer service provided by service providers? To which 55 respondents answered Yes and the remaining 7 answered No. This shows that majority of the respondents are of the opinion that culture has an effect on the quality of service provided and experienced by customers. Ihtiyar & Ahmad (2014) citing other scholars wrote, culture influences customer's perceptions and expectations during the evaluation of service experiences). Studies on culture-based challenges in the past decades have focused on how cultural aspects influence customer choices, employee performance,

personal orientation, service evaluation, customer satisfaction, and purchase intention. (590-591.)

Culture is a term that refers to a large and diverse set of mostly intangible aspects of social life. According to sociologists, culture consists of the values, beliefs, spoken languages and gestures, communication, and practices that people share in common and that can be used to define them as a body or group (Cole 2019). These cultures are usually been passed from one generation to the other through communications (written or spoken) and practices. Some of these cultural practices (good or bad) are accepted and practiced without thinking or asking questions. Some people don't even know the reasons why some of these cultural practices exist in the first place.

Analyzing the responses, some of the respondents stated that they could not remember some details about a particular customer service experience. Perhaps the experiences were bad and they made a conscious effort to forget them. An experience may so good that it remains in the memory of the person who had it and can also be so bad that a person chooses to forget them or do not want to remember because of the disappointment or annoyance it created. Experiences, both negative and positive leaves some impressions on people. Like it did one of the respondents who enjoyed the experience of the service got from an employee and it prompted repeat patronage. Most of the respondents had experiences to share.

The positive and negative experiences shared had factors that made them so. Culture (the way things are been done) and the language barrier affected the quality of service received. Language, behavior, communication style, etc, are some of the things that make up culture. How the respondents were treated due to the way things are done, for example, the behavior of the customer care representative, moving too close to a customer that was not comfortable with it, giving bad service because the customer was not of the same culture, lack of proper communication due to language differences, not understanding what the customer needs, the way service is been carried out, politeness, etc. All are culture related.

Regarding the responses on the outcome of experiences, it is evident that intercultural competence is needed for sales, developing and maintaining a customer base, and growth of a company. Some respondents had their issues resolved, a few were unresolved, some helped themselves get what they wanted, some gave bad feedbacks, and some mentioned they will not visit or patronizes the company again. All these will have an impact on the company either directly or indirectly. No sales can be carried out without communication. Communication goes beyond words, it involves gestures, body language, eye contact, understanding, perceptions, and presentation. When something goes wrong with any of the mentioned, then the communication cannot be said to be successful and anything can be the result of such. In some cases, it may lead to violence which can also lead to destructions of different types if not curbed immediately. To avoid these, customer care representatives need to be well trained to communicate effectively.

The need for customer service representatives to learn and appreciate other cultures is made clear. Tolerance, understanding, and empathy will be cultivated through the process which will help boost the quality of service delivery. When a non-judgemental knowledge of culture is achieved, cultural practice or behavior will be understood making it easy to relate with customers. Understanding is one thing and accepting what is understood is another. Where there is understanding but no acceptance, the customer cannot be treated well. Customer service representatives need to learn to not only understand but also accept the culture learned alongside the people of the learned culture. It may appear difficult to learn, understand, and accept every culture, but a smile, been polite, approachable, and warmth towards other people penetrates and destroys cultural differences making them feel comfortable.

Learning and speaking additional language especially one that is commonly understood will also be of importance because it will elevate both the confidence level of the customer service representative and satisfaction of the customer. An experience of a respondent proved this to be useful. The respondent mentioned been attended by the customer service representative in a commonly understood

language different from the one spoken in the host community as soon as it was noted that he was a foreigner. This made the respondent happy and satisfied with the quality of service delivered. This also makes communication and transactions easy, understood, comfortable, positive, and progressive. Another respondent mentioned that the quality of service changed as soon as the customer service representative noticed the respondent was a foreigner. The respondent said the customer service representative became rude and less helpful. An attitude that is not suitable for both customer and business growth.

Listening and attentive listening is an important skill customer service representatives need to cultivate because it affects the service given to customers which may cost the customer more as in the case of a respondent who ended up paying extra for a service because the person in charge of the service did not listen to the complaints. And it can also lead to a huge waste of products or services offered by service providing companies.

The models for cultivating cultural competence discussed in this research all point out the fact that the cultivation process is a conscious effort that requires individual attitude (respect, openness, willingness to learn and accept new things), knowledge and comprehension (culture and communication mediums) and skills (listening, observing, evaluate and relate which leads to understanding) to produce interactions which generate internally (adaptability, flexibility, and empathy) and external (good quality service). The whole process begins within the individual (customer service representative) from attitude, ability, and willingness to develop which eventually shows forth in good service.

These attitudes and skills on the other hand can be affected by the way the employee is treated. Employers need to take good care of their employees. When employees are not treated well, work in unhealthy conditions, not been given a voice, are been marginalized or discriminated, frustrated, and abused in some cases, they may vent out their anger and frustration on the customers. This may lead to bad or poor service, loss of customers, bad feedback, and a bad reputation for the

company. When employers treat their employees well, mindful of their health, ensuring their workplace is safe, etc, they do not only produce good employees that deliver quality service to customers, they also open their company to awards and recognitions. Saukkonen in a lecture note on workplace wellbeing shared an example of a company that was presented a special award as a result of caring for its employees. Business in the Community presented the Special Award for Workplace Well-being to Procter & Gamble last night at the 2005 UK's "Best Workplaces" Award Dinner, run by Great Place to Work® Institute UK. Procter & Gamble was selected from a short-list of companies large and small that performed exceptionally well on measures focused on making a positive impact on people in the workplace such as on safety, mental and physical health and work/life balance. The company stood out with the breadth and depth of the initiatives it runs. These included programmes related to occupational and environmental health as well as those with a pro-active focus on improving and ensuring good health; such as an interactive health assessment programme and health promotion on issues such as sun safety and nutrition. (Saukkonen, Workplace wellbeing.)

A good relationship between employers and employees, fellow employees and their work plays a key role in quality service delivery. Eskola (2012) explained that relationships are key and important in the workplace. This is summarized in the figure below.

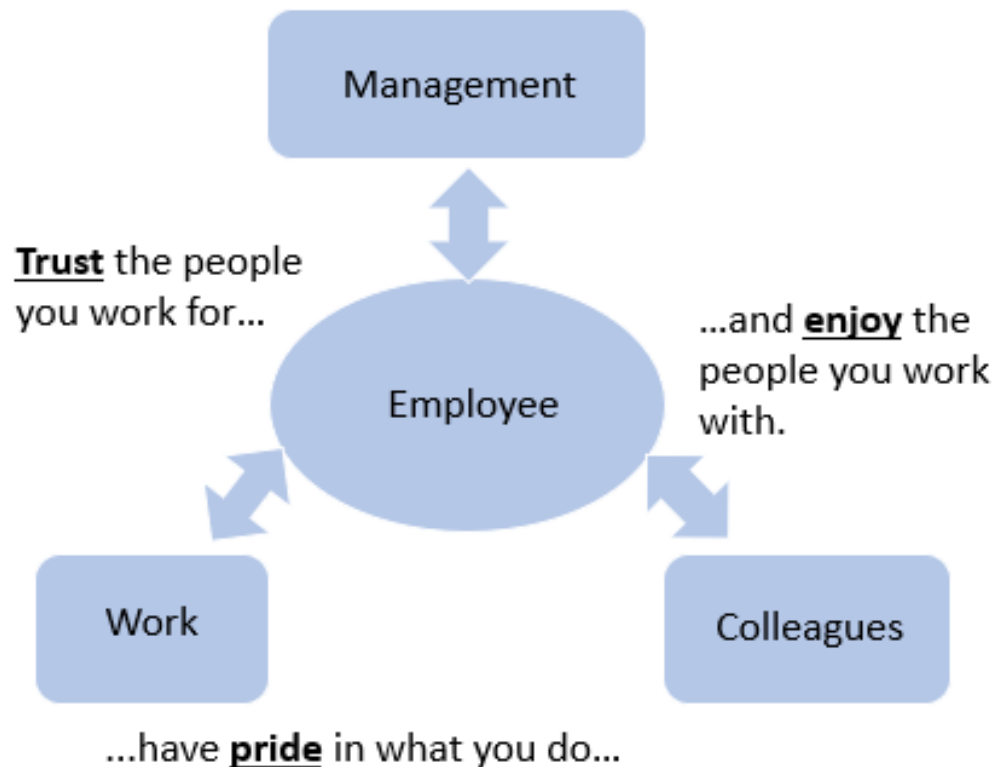


Figure 9. Good workplace relationship

Source: Eskola 2012

The whole relationship activity revolves around the employee. The trust that the employer will provide safety, good working environment, and everything that is needed to make the workplace conducive to work, pride in their work, and enjoy working with other employees will encourage them to put in their best and give quality service to customers. It is fulfilling to work in a workplace where one enjoys one's work and the people they work with and take pride in their work. A gap in this circle of workplace relationships will lead to poor or incomplete service delivery.

There is a need for training. Training refers to the teaching and learning activities carried on for the primary purpose of helping members of an organization to acquire and also to apply the required knowledge, skill, and attitudes to perform their jobs effectively. Training is a learning experience that seeks a relatively permanent change in an individual that will improve his/her ability to perform his job. (Chand.) Training

will help develop good cultural knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness, and skills such as observation without judging, listening, and good relations. Training of customer service representatives in intercultural communication competence is needed to develop, increase, and maintain this skill in order to help them carry out their duties effectively. This training should not be a one-time activity but one which should be done from time to time because cultivating intercultural competence is a continuous activity.

The advice given by respondents to customer service representatives of service providing companies all revolved around intercultural communication competence. Making it evident that customer care representatives need to cultivate intercultural communication competence.

6 Conclusion

After centuries of technological progress and advances in international cooperation, the world is more connected than ever (Kolb 2019). People changed the environment and will continue to change their environment as purpose and needs serve them. The move out of one's cultural setting and away from one's people into new environments can not be prohibited due to globalization. This brings people with different cultural background and upbringing into the same environment or community with a need to communicate and understand each other. Receiving services with good quality from customer service representatives of service providing companies in such communities becomes a challenge if these customer service representatives have intercultural communication competence.

A mixed data collection method through a survey was used to collect data from young adults for this explanatory research. And the result gathered from the experiences of these young adults shows that culture has a role to play in the delivery of quality service by customer service representatives to customers of service providing companies. And the need to ensure these customer service representatives are competent in intercultural communication can not be

overemphasized. The respondents also suggested that customer service representatives should be polite, give equal treatments, be multi-lingual, multicultural, open-minded, culturally competent, etc to improve their quality of service.

The researcher suggests that employers should choose and put to work the model of cultivating intercultural communication competence that best suits their organization through quality training and practice. And to also create good working conditions for their employees which will help boost their performance level.

The combination of a good attitude and training will produce customer service representatives who are skilled in intercultural communication competence. As mentioned by Cross et al. (1989), Krajewski (2011), sees intercultural competence as a developmental process that evolves over an extended period of time. Both individuals and organizations are at various levels of awareness, knowledge, and skills along the cultural competence continuum. To develop and strengthen these roots of intercultural competence is a positive step towards increasing the effectiveness of any intercultural experience. (140.)

6.1 Recommendations

Intercultural competence should be deliberately cultivated. Employers should discover and adopt the model that best suits their establishment and apply them. They should also equip their customer service representatives with intercultural competence through training, practice, and more practice, as it is been said 'practice makes one perfect'.

The foundational blocks for cultivating intercultural competence discussed in the research were attitudes, knowledge and comprehension, and skills. Proper management and development of these foundational blocks will lead to positive internal and external outcomes. Knowledge, comprehension, and skills can be developed and this can be achieved through;

- ❖ Periodic intercultural competence training

- ❖ Expositions
- ❖ Practise
- ❖ Evaluations
- ❖ Feedbacks

These should be done constantly to attain perfection.

Attitude on the other hand cannot be developed for an individual, but can be enhanced externally. Employers can help enhance employees' attitudes by providing good working conditions for their employees, this will encourage productivity.

Employers need to:

- ❖ Foster a good working relationship between management, workers, and their colleagues.
- ❖ Create a safe working environment, good work station, and ensure safety comes first.
- ❖ Set the example by treating workers as human beings, individually and with respect.
- ❖ Give the workers a sense of belonging by involving them in decision making, listening to their complaints and applying positive measures to get them resolved, make communication flow easy, open and reachable, treat them as people who have personal lives, and make their welfare the company's priority.
- ❖ Treat all workers equally irrespective of their gender, race, and culture. Avoid bullying, unfair treatment, harassment, and discrimination. And whenever such is brought to their notice, put an immediate end to it.
- ❖ Motivate them by giving positive feedbacks, recommendations, bonuses, and compensations. This will yield positive performance that will reflect on the type of service given to customers and self-satisfaction for the workers.

According to Dr. Goodnight/SAS Institute, Eskola (2012), If you treat people like they make a difference to your company, they will make a difference.

Customer service representatives themselves need to make efforts to develop and make essential changes that will help them carry out their duties effectively. Good attitudes like respect, openness, and a simple smile goes a long way and say a lot about an individual. Customer service representatives should learn to treat people equally irrespective of their race, color, culture, gender, and appearance. These in turn affect the sales and profit margin level of the establishment. And in some cases the bonuses they receive at the end of the day.

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